

Lincoln's Political Theology

Overview: Students will examine the extent to which Abraham Lincoln's religious and spiritual beliefs are reflected in his actions during the Civil War.

Materials:

Meditation on the Divine Will

(<http://showcase.netins.net/web/creative/lincoln/speeches/meditat.htm>)

Second Inaugural Address

(<http://showcase.netins.net/web/creative/lincoln/speeches/inaug2.htm>)

Inaugural Address March 4, 1933 excerpt

December 8, 1941 speech excerpt

Aim/Essential Question: To what extent did Lincoln's religious views guide him during the Civil War?

Background Information: Many religious leaders, conservative and liberal alike, expressed concern about Lincoln's seeming lack of religious faith. Raised as a Baptist on the Kentucky frontier, Lincoln as a young man developed a sense of fatalism that was rooted in the prevailing Calvinist conventions of the time. This sentiment was predominant throughout his life and played a significant role in Lincoln's understanding of what he referred to as the "Doctrine of Necessity." As a lawyer, practicing on the 8th Illinois Circuit, Lincoln found little time or use for formal religion. During his presidency a family pew was reserved for the Lincoln's at the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C. One Lincoln scholar has argued that Lincoln moved from skeptic to prophet during the course of the Civil War. There is no doubt that Lincoln was more familiar than most Americans with biblical literature, much of which he had memorized in his youth. In a reply dated September 7, 1864 to Loyal Negroes of Baltimore, Lincoln wrote, "All the good Saviour gave to the world was communicated through this book. But for it we could not know right from wrong. All things most desirable for man's welfare, here and hereafter, are to be found portrayed in it." The pivotal year in Lincoln's religious development may have been 1862 in the aftermath of his son Willie's death and in the weeks prior to the Battle of Antietam. During this period he penned his Meditation on the Divine Will. His personal secretary, John Hay, discovered this document after his death. His reflections in the Meditation foreshadowed his ideas about God that he would reveal publicly in his Second Inaugural Address.

Objectives:

1. Students will read and explain the meaning of Lincoln's Meditation on the Divine Will.
2. Students will identify political and spiritual qualities in Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address.
3. Students will determine the extent to which the ideas in the Meditation on the Divine Will are reflected in the Second Inaugural Address.

Motivation: Some historians believe that presidential speeches are written solely for public approval. Others have said that speeches provide a window into the most personal thoughts of a president. With which of these two positions would you agree? Explain.

Procedures:

1. Divide the class into separate groups. Half will examine the Meditation on the Divine Will and half will be assigned the Second Inaugural Address.
2. Ask students to note particular vocabulary terms with which they are not familiar.
3. Define key vocabulary terms.
4. Select readers from each group for each of the two documents.

Methods of Analysis: Each group will analyze one of the assigned documents using the following question as a guide.

1. What was the occasion for writing the document?
2. Who is the audience that the document is aimed for?
3. What is the purpose of the document?
4. What statements in the document would you consider the most significant?

Groups will then be reconvened as a whole class to share their views and to answer the following questions:

Related Questions:

- In the Second Inaugural Address, identify the grave offense against God ascribed to both the North and the South.
- In his Meditation on the Devine Will, what reason does Lincoln give for the unending Civil War?
- How does Lincoln see evidence of the Will of God in the continuing conflict?
- Why has Lincoln's final paragraph in the Second Inaugural Address become part of America's political and literary legacy?

Summary Questions:

1. To what extent were Lincoln's public words influenced by his spiritual values?
2. How did Lincoln explain the carnage of the Civil War?
3. Why is the Second Inaugural considered by many to be Lincoln's greatest speech?
4. To what extent are the ideas in the two documents similar or different? Explain.

Application Questions:

(Scan and Insert here --- Inaugural Address (1933) and Day of Infamy excerpts)

1. Franklin Delano Roosevelt has long been considered one of America's great presidents. During his presidency he was confronted with two major crises, The Great Depression and World War II. Compare and contrast FDR's spiritual references to those of Lincoln in his Second Inaugural.
2. Choose either FDR's Freedom from Fear excerpt or the excerpt from his Day of Infamy speech. Rewrite the speech you select as if Abraham Lincoln had been the speaker.

Lincoln's Meditation on the Divine Will

The will of God prevails. In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both may be, and one must be, wrong. God cannot be for and against the same thing at the same time. In the present civil war it is quite possible that God's purpose is something different from the purpose of either party; and yet the human instrumentalities, working just as they do, are of the best adaptation to effect his purpose. I am almost ready to say that this is probably true; that God wills this contest, and wills that it shall not end yet. By his mere great power on the minds of the now contestants, he could have either saved or destroyed the Union without a human contest. Yet the contest began. And, having begun, he could give the final victory to either side any day. Yet the contest proceeds.

Document B (1865)

The Second Inaugural Address

At this second appearing to take the oath of the presidential office, there is less occasion for an extended address than there was at the first. Then a statement, somewhat in detail, of a course to be pursued, seemed fitting and proper. Now, at the expiration of four years, during which public declarations have been constantly called forth on every point and phase of the great contest which still absorbs the attention, and engrosses the energies of the nation, little that is new could be presented. The progress of our arms, upon which all else chiefly depends, is as well known to the public as to myself; and it is, I trust, reasonably satisfactory and encouraging to all. With high hope for the future, no prediction in regard to it is ventured.

On the occasion corresponding to this four years ago, all thoughts were anxiously directed to an impending civil war. All dreaded it--all sought to avert it. While the inaugural [sic] address was being delivered from this place, devoted altogether to *saving*

the Union without war, insurgent agents were in the city seeking to *destroy* it without war--seeking to dissolve [sic] the Union, and divide effects, by negotiation. Both parties deprecated war; but one of them would *make* war rather than let the nation survive; and the other would *accept* war rather than let it perish. And the war came.

One eighth of the whole population were colored slaves, not distributed generally over the Union, but localized in the Southern part of it. These slaves constituted a peculiar and powerful interest. All knew that this interest was, somehow, the cause of the war. To strengthen, perpetuate, and extend this interest was the object for which the insurgents would rend the Union, even by war; while the government claimed no right to do more than to restrict the territorial enlargement of it. Neither party expected for the war, the magnitude, or the duration, which it has already attained. Neither anticipated that the *cause* of the conflict might cease with, or even before, the conflict itself should cease. Each looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding. Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces; but let us judge not that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has his own purposes. "Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!" If we shall suppose that American Slavery is one of those offences which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South, this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offence came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a Living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope--ferently do we pray--that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bond-man's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether"

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan--to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.